

Committee on Resources, Full Committee

- - Rep. James V. Hansen, Chairman
U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6201 - - (202) 225-2761

Witness Statement

**Statement of David Woodside, Vice Chairman
National Park Hospitality Association
Before
Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks
U.S. House of Representatives**

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Mr. Chairman, on behalf of National Park Hospitality Association we want to thank your committee for convening this hearing on visitor access to the National Parks. I am David Woodside, Vice Chairman of the National Park Hospitality Association and President of the Acadia Corporation that operates visitor services in Acadia National Park.

The National Park Hospitality Association is the national trade association of the businesses that provide lodging, food services, transportation, and retail services to visitors in the National Park system. Our members work in public-private partnership with the National Park Service and have served the public interest well over 100 years, pre-dating the establishment of the National Park Service (NPS).

Basic Management Policy for National Parks

"National parks belong to all Americans ... Enjoyment of park resources and values by the people of the United States is part of the fundamental purpose of all parks . . . The Service is committed to providing appropriate, high quality opportunities for visitors to enjoy the parks, and will maintain within the parks an atmosphere that is open, inviting, and accessible to every segment of American society . . . The fact that a park use may have an impact does not necessarily mean it will impair park resources or values for enjoyment of future generations." **2001 NPS Management Policies Guide**

The words sound good, but sometimes management policies are at odds with the expansive policy objectives. No words on paper can compensate for the disruptive practices at those same national parks. When these actions take place, there is invariably a decline in visitors and revenue to the concessionaires within the impacted parks. No other entity in the national parks has more to gain or lose from public relations and management decisions made at that park than the visitor services concessioner.

The National Park Service has done an outstanding job over the years of preserving and managing a steadily expanding network of national parks, national historic sites, national seashores and national recreation areas which now number 379 units while accommodating a growing number of system visitors.

As established by the National Park Service Act of August 25, 1916, the National Park Service clearly was given a dual mandate:

"To conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life in the parks and to provide

for the enjoyment of same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

The NPS has been entrusted to preserve our parks for the enjoyment, education and inspiration of current and future generations. We believe that park units should be preserved for visitors, not just for the sake of preservation alone. Whether it is the extraordinary vistas of the Grand Canyon or the ability to track a soldier's footsteps across the now quiet battlefields of Gettysburg and Valley Forge, national parks have tremendous value to each one of us.

Members of the National Park Hospitality Association are committed to preserving access to National Parks for all people. Not everyone can don a backpack and trek across the wilderness. But with responsible management of the parks, and services provided in them, people can come and experience the wonder of these special places.

The concessioners strongly support park resource preservation and work to enhance the park environment both philosophically and as business imperative.

Shifting Park Visitation Policy

It is often very difficult to strike an equitable and fair balance between visitor use and resource preservation which often forces the National Park Service to manage competing interests of the environmentalists and visitors.

In 1993, then Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt announced a policy shift which emphasized the NPS' role to preserve the park environment, stating that "we are loving our parks to death." The Secretary of Interior was engaged in a concerted public relations campaign to discourage Americans from going to their national parks.

During the recent past, then NPS Director Robert G. Stanton in a keynote speech at the NPS' Discovery 2000 encapsulated this shift by stating that the 'National Park Service is now a conservation agency' with the major focus on protecting and preserving America's natural and cultural resources, not visitor services.

This shift toward preservation, coupled with a stream of negative national media stories, has skewed the public perception of the national parks. During the past decade, park visitation has been routinely discouraged by media accounts that highlight the supposed ravages of tourism to the national parks with nightmares of congestion, overcrowding and blighted parks.

Further media stories stress the dilapidated and depleted state of the parks emphasizing the lack of infrastructure available to accommodate these hordes of tourists. One recent story by the *Chicago Tribune*, claimed that parking spaces were so scarce at the Grand Canyon that visitors had to circle for hours waiting until a space opened up much like a crowded shopping mall.

Visitation in national parks reduced.

The public certainly responded to Secretary Babbitt's message. This federal policy shift has resulted in a definite impact on the amount of park visitation. Since 1994, there has been significant visitor decline in some of the nation's major parks. The NPS Intermountain Region has posted a steady decrease in recreational visitation over the past eight years, especially at Grand Canyon National Park.

Overall, national park visitation is flat. System wide NPS has posted a small increase in visitation of around 1.2 % annually, however many national park units have actually experienced visitor declines. In fact, over the past several years many of the major parks have experienced a decline in the number of visitors well beyond factors like inclement weather, wild fires, and increased gasoline prices.

The following chart illustrates the overall decline in visitation at some of our concessioners' parks from 1993 when Secretary Babbitt issued his proclamation.

**Comparison Chart Showing Declining Visitation in National Parks
Since 1993, 1999 and 2000**

NATIONAL PARK	1993 VISITATION	1999 VISITATION	2000 VISITATION
Acadia	2,656,034	2,602,227	2,469,238
Bandelier	366,638	332,764	248,276
Bryce	1,107,951	1,081,521	1,099,275
Death Valley	998,474	1,227,583	1,179,094
Denali	505,565	386,867	363,983
Everglades	973,706	1,073,982	995,390
Grand Canyon	4,575,602	4,575,124	4,460,226
Grand Teton	2,568,689	2,680,025	2,590,624
Mesa Verde	566,054	635,736	452,287
Muir Woods	1,517,834	883,164	864,229
Petrified Forest	936,429	666,978	605,192
Shenandoah	1,951,366	1,339,286	1,419,579
Yellowstone	2,912,193	3,131,381	2,838,233
Zion	2,392,580	2,449,664	2,432,348
TOTAL	24,029,115	23,066,302	22,017,974

Figures provided National Park Service Public Service Public Use Statistics

Concessioner businesses have experienced declines as a direct result of the lower number of visitors. In many major national parks, we have witnessed a reduction in our members' concession businesses in terms of fewer hotel bookings, restaurant patronage, and slower gift and merchandise sales. The association received reports that many concession operations experienced a reduction in business last year from a few percent up to 50% in the parks hit by last summer's wildfires. When viewed alongside rapidly escalating energy and operational costs which impact our member's businesses, the future for the park concession business is far from robust.

Doing Business in the Parks Is Always a Challenge

Federal policy is just one of the factors impacting park visitation. Visitor service business is affected by many factors including facility, transportation and services infrastructure, inclement weather and other acts of nature. The national park hospitality industry is continually challenged by natural forces like the devastating Yellowstone fires of 1992 and the Yosemite floods in 1996 that closed the park to visitors, and the summer of 2000 spate of wildfires that resulted in over 30% fewer visitors to the western parks. The

irony of the 2000 fire season was the fact that the devastating New Mexico fires were started by the NPS itself as a "controlled" fire.

NPS Management Decisions Directly Affect Park Visitation

Interior Secretary Babbitt's campaign proved to be a public relations disaster. It is true Secretary Babbitt did attempt to reverse his message in 1994 with backtracking acknowledgments that, "I didn't really mean that the American people should not come to their national parks." It was clearly a case of too little, too late.

Today, the American public seems convinced that parks do not welcome visitors.

We are very encouraged by the recent developments in which the National Park Service and the National Park Foundation are teaming up to launch a multi-million dollar, multi-year public education program to issue citizens an invitation to 'Experience Your America' and visit their national parks.

Conclusion

While our critical examples demonstrate how federal park policy decisions discourage US park visitors, we also wish to stress to the committee that we want to build upon our unique partnership with the NPS to enhance the resource protection and preservation goals and increase federal revenues to NPS to confront the monstrous maintenance back log.

Our partnership with NPS is unique. We have more to give and more to gain from a successful, practical implementation of goals that heighten the commitments to both the visitor experience and the conservation of the precious park resources.

Congress needs to provide guidance and restore a more balanced approach to park preservation and visitation. Congress needs to fund the park infrastructure maintenance backlog fully. Congress needs to ensure that the dual roles of the National Park Service of preservation and visitor service continue to remain equal.

We will work with you, Mr. Chairman, and this committee to achieve these mutually compatible goals.

We thank you for this opportunity to testify.

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